

Spreading the Seeds of the Faith
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Pentecost is the day we celebrate the birth of the Christian Church. We wear red to pay homage to those tongues of fire that supposedly rested on each of the disciples. We sing songs about the Holy Spirit coming, about the church we love commissioned from above. We ask for the Holy Spirit to burn brightly in our churches once more, to enrich our lives and refine our faith in this holy fire. It's a great day.

Back when it happened, the disciples met some resistance from the crowds when they emerge from their gathering hoping to spread the Good News. It says in the Acts of the Apostles, "All were amazed and perplexed.... But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'"[1]

People seriously thought they were drunk and crazy, not exactly the reaction you'd want to receive from people you're hoping to speak to about Christ's love, compassion, and acceptance. UCC ministers Kathryn Matthews Huey and Mark J. Suriano explain it this way, "Fire, wind, and humble Galileans speaking persuasively in many tongues were dramatic signs that God was doing a new thing that would transform the lives of all those present, and far beyond, in time and place. Maybe it was a little frightening, something people would want to explain away, or to contain with cynical comments that blamed it all on drunkenness."[2]

This would have been a new experience for the crowds. It wasn't unheard of for people to hear about remarkable displays of the power of God; they believed in the sounds and the lights and the miracles of God much more so than we may today. But here's the difference—when Moses was on the mountaintop talking to God or Jesus was on the mountaintop being transfigured, there were only a few witnesses. They were typically the insiders and the people whom Jesus or Moses relied upon most. The people at large would hear about these experiences, they were part of the oral tradition of the faith. But the average person didn't always see these experiences for themselves.[3]

Pentecost is a whole new moment. Here's how Huey and Suriano explain it, "Here, at the dawn of a new era, on the birthday of a church called to spread to the ends of the earth, the display is for everyone. Not just the disciples, gathered in a room, getting themselves together after Jesus is once again departed. Not just the holiest or the most faithful or the most learned, not just the believers, not just those who were with Jesus on the road or witnesses to his Resurrection. No, in this case, at this moment, 'all flesh,' male and female, old and young, slave and free, are invited and included."[4]

Whether we interpret the events literally or not, we can hopefully take the story at face value and see that something new and exciting is happening here. This is a whole new way of being religious in some ways, of spreading Christ's message to everyone. It's freely given. It's dramatically proclaimed. It's not reserved for the elite and powerful, but spread to the ends of the earth, to anyone who has ears to hear and eyes to see and a heart to accept Christ's love for us all.

And this is the way we are called to be the Church today. We've already lived into this calling today at Pilgrim Church by accepting new members into our midst and baptizing Peter and Charlie as children of God, disciples of Christ, and members of the Church on this Pentecost Sunday. I want you to remember this Pentecost, because it's a really special one. If we had taken Communion today, but I wouldn't do that to you because we could have been here for two hours, it would have been complete.

Baptisms and new members joining our church is a fantastic way to celebrate Pentecost. Opening ourselves up to new experiences, new members, new children of God, this is what the birth of the Church of Jesus Christ was all about.

Martin Copenhaver, senior pastor of the Wellesley Village Church wrote a wonderful reflection in the UCC's Stillspeaking Devotional this week that brings home how we are called to be the Church today. He reflected on the Parable of the Sower from Matthew's Gospel, which I clearly know is not about Pentecost, but it echoes the lessons of the day.

You'll maybe remember that Jesus tells the parable where a farmer scatters seeds throughout his field. Some of the seeds land on the path and the birds eat them. Some of the seeds fall on rocky ground, grow into plants, but then die because they can't take root. Some of the seeds fall in with weeds, which basically choke them to death. And finally, some seeds fall on good soil and grow to be tall and strong, yielding a good harvest for the farmer.[5] We are to admire the seeds planted in the good soil and wonder about our own faith, does it have the water, the sunlight, the depth, the space to grow and flourish? Or not?

Copenhaver's reflection stemmed from acting out this parable with children and youth of a church he once served in Connecticut. They planted bean seeds beside the road, among rocks, among thorns, and in good, fertile soil in accordance with how Jesus describes the situation. His plan was that all the seeds would die except the seeds planted in the good soil, bringing home this parable about living into Christ's message of "the Kingdom of Heaven." [6]

Unfortunately, things didn't go exactly as planned. In his words, "As the weeks passed, however, I noticed with horror (the children with glee) that the bean planted among the thorns was keeping pace with the bean planted in the good soil. In four weeks, only one plant remained... the one among the thorns. It was doing so well that it yielded a handful of beans. The children thought this was so hilarious they planted one of the beans in a pot and gave it to me as a gift. Bless their little hearts." [7]

Copenhaver wanted to teach the lesson of the parable exactly as it was outlined but ended up learning a different lesson. In the end, he says, "What I noticed only after attempting to act out the parable is that we cannot know where the rocks are, where the good soil is. That knowledge is given to God alone. We simply never know where God's kingdom is going to take root. Our job is simply to spread kingdom seeds with something like abandon so they might take root where God sees fit. There is something wonderfully freeing about knowing that." [8]

This reflection on the Parable of the Sower has everything in the world to do with Pentecost, with the birth of the Christian Church we celebrate today. How was Jesus to know that his lessons would stick with some of his followers and not others? How were the disciples to know that some in the crowds would find truth and meaning in their words and others would literally think they were drunk and crazy? They ended up just spreading the seeds of the faith with abandon in some cases, hoping and praying that they would take root.

Isn't this exactly what we do today? We reach out to all people, we preach and teach, we learn and grow, we baptize and bless, we share joys and struggles, we welcome and see visions and dream dreams, we glorify God and give thanks for this community. We spread our kingdom seeds with abandon and hope in our hearts, filled with the love of God and the presence of the Holy Spirit to make this world a better place. Who knows exactly the impact and effects of our lessons and our actions, but isn't that rather wonderful and liberating? We do our best, we pray for those seeds to take root and flourish, and we leave the rest up to God. Amen.

[1] Acts 2:12-13

[2] Kathryn Matthews Huey and Mark J. Suriano, Sermon Seeds: Pentecost Sunday Year B, May 27, 2012, <http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/may-27-2012-pentecost.html>

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Matthew 13:3-9

[6] Matthew 13:23

[7] Martin Copenhaver, "Where is the Good Soil?" UCC Stillspeaking Daily Devotional, May 20, 2012

[8] Ibid.